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Remaining friends with the dead:

Emerging grieving practices on social networking sites

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Abstract

Remaining friends with the dead:

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How do we mourn the dead and proceed with our lives when the dead do not absent themselves from our everyday world, but remain integrated into our community of friends on social networking sites? This paper explores the changes occurring in the ways in which we experience online the deaths of our loved ones, namely, a collapse between public and private modes of grief.

The changes under examination include the changing perception of death, identity creation and ownership, the role of the bereaved, theoretical/therapeutic approaches to grieving, the function of ritual, and commemoration of the dead. Questions this paper addresses include: to whom do the dead belong? Does death become banal when it is incorporated into everyday life? How can a ritual reflect a passage from one state of being to another when you are part of a system that does not recognize a change in status?

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INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the grieving practices that are emerging out of the shared communal places of Social Network Sites (SNSs). Dying and grieving have long been part of the human condition. The ability to consider our own mortality, to experience the loss of loved ones, to want to remember and honor the dead, and to be supported by a community, has not changed in 40,000 years (Getty et al. 2011, Shlain 2003). Communication technology, in the form of increased access to the internet and social networking sites in particular, has had some significant effects on how people express grief and experience loss in social groups. In many ways, information communication technologies (ICT) are an extension of the human ability to use the tools at hand to fit the needs and circumstances of the present. Walter et al. (2012: 295) note the reciprocity between the technology we create and the effect that it has on our behavior and attitudes, and that the actions we take offline are reflected in the world we participate in online: "How the internet affects how we die and grieve depends on how interactions online relate to interactions offline, and how both affect the experience of those who are dying, caring, mourning, or remembering."

There are two major areas to consider when thinking about death and grieving on SNSs: what it means to die, and how we grieve. In terms of what it means to die, this paper considers how we comprehend death, and ways in which that concept has changed since the prevalence of the internet and social networking. We will also discuss who it is that "dies," and of whom the online mourning community consists. Regarding grieving, we will examine how theories of grief have evolved to fit the present social environment,

the rituals that we create to mark the transition of death online, and the ways in which we remember and honor the dead. Here we will examine the similarities and differences in how social media users experience the deaths of loved ones, namely, the collapse between private and public modes of grief.

The first aspect to examine when exploring the meaning of death online is what death seems to mean or imply to the denizens of online social spaces. Leaving aside metaphysical interpretations, we envisage death as the final movement from one state to another within the limits of human existence. From the perspective of the pre-Internet era, the dead are permanently and untouchably separate from the living. However, from the cave paintings of Lascaux to the Story Corps interviews between family members digitally archived in the Library of Congress, technology has been used in the past to traverse the boundary between the living and the dead. Technology, in its present incarnation as the Internet, promotes a reconfiguration of what it means to be connected and to share information with friends and loved ones. Connection to friends is facilitated through web-based social network sites, which boyd and Ellison (2007) note allow the user to "(1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their [sic] list of connections and those made by others within the system." Unlike the digital data that they produce, these "connections" (more commonly known as friends) are unmistakably mortal.

An increasingly common circumstance is learning of the death of a friend via social networking sites. Walter et al.'s point about grieving online reflecting grieving offline is reiterated by the fact that communication of the death takes place in a social

space of the SNS. Mourners in an online community grieve their dead, but in a twist that may be unique to the medium of SNSs, the dead exhibit a continued presence. SNS users interact with the memorialized profiles of the dead using the established social norms and modes of interaction common to social networking sites. Death has the potential to become mundane as it is integrated into everyday life for the survivors; the bereaved interact with the profiles of the deceased in a manner similar to the profiles of living friends. This interaction can make death seem less meaningful, or create feelings of ambiguity or uncertainty. More than anything else, the event of death creates two categories of inhabitants of the social space of dying, the deceased and the mourners.

In examining the social space of dying, we will look at how the identity of the deceased was conceived of and enacted in a pre-Internet age, and see if the identity that is formed in the SNS differs. An individual creates his identity and it is instantiated in the physical reality of his life. A person's interests (i.e., rock-climbing, gourmet cooking, science-fiction literature), create physical artifacts in his life (i.e., climbing equipment, cookbooks and kitchen equipment, books and/or movies), in addition to creations that are less tangible (i.e., a sense of pride and accomplishment, gustatory enjoyment, friendships based on shared interests). Although a person may express his post-mortem wishes via a last will and testament, or an echo of him may remain in his writings or photographs, essentially his voice ceases when he dies. In the pre-Internet era of funerals and obituaries published in the local newspaper, the family of the deceased had the exclusive right to create the post-mortem meaning of the deceased's life. Although identity pre- and post-Internet is formed within a communal context, only in the post-Internet era does the ability to define the narrative of the deceased not rest with any defined set of

mourners. On social networking sites, identity is a dynamic interplay created in the context of a social community that encompasses friends, classmates, co-workers, family, acquaintances, and celebrities. The identity that is created in this shared space effectively continues past the physical death of its originator, in that it contains elements that are not a unique product of the individual. In an online environment with intersecting social circles, conflicting narratives of the deceased can coexist in an uncomfortable and ambiguous way.

The narrative online identity of the deceased is created in part by her past content choices (i.e., shared posts, uploaded pictures and videos, status updates, comments and "likes"), but also by the ways in which she is viewed by the loved ones who survive her. Who are these mourners, and what is their role in the evolving concept of death in an online environment? In an era where relationships were based on physical proximity and family ties, there was a hierarchy of bereavement: family members were the principal mourners, extended family was the secondary level of mourners, friends and colleagues were tertiary or "outside" mourners. In the new interconnected online space, the mourners are everyone who participated in the deceased's life, designated as "friends" within the SNS. Although there are proximate hierarchical structures within the social networking sites (i.e., friends can be sorted into different groups, or given labels that demarcate "family," "close friend," or "acquaintance"), the ability of all of the friends of the deceased to access the profile wall without restriction renders the mourning group a de facto democratic community. For this online community, mourning is a participatory activity that takes place in a public setting. However, mourners often have conflicting needs. While the close family and friends might have a desire for privacy and formality,

other mourners may have more casual and colloquial modes of expression. The inclusion online of mourners who might have been un-included in the past (e.g., disenfranchised grievers) can lead to conflicts. People grieve their loss in different ways, and the ways in which many people express their grief have changed due to the technologies that connect them. Thus, not only do the modes of expression of the online natives differ from what an older cohort might find appropriate, but also the view that the varied mourners have of the deceased is subject to narrative multiplicity.

One of the places we see the greatest shift in social practices, and the greatest friction between pre- and post-Internet social mores, is in the process of grieving. The twentieth century was dominated by a psychological view of death and dying (Silverman 2013). In this view, the individual mourner was expected to manage his emotions, and grief was something that needed to be dealt with and overcome in order for the mourner to proceed with his life. From this perspective, the actions of grieving should hew closely to Elizabeth Kübler-Ross's five stages of experiencing death and dying (i.e., denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance). The assumption is that the mourner must move through these stages in order to progress from the paralyzing shock of grief and to return to normal life as soon as feasible. The five stages model assumes that people who remain attached to the dead are preventing themselves from accepting the reality of the death, and are experiencing dysfunctional (or even pathological) grief. In contrast, Klass, Silverman, and Nickman (1996) put forward a new theory of grief which contradicts the need for detachment and distance from the deceased. The underlying principle of their Continuing Bonds theory is an acceptance that the dead continue to play a role in people's lives, and that negotiating a new relationship to the

deceased is a healthy part of grieving. In this theory, the mourner creates a model of the deceased in his mind, and interacts with that model to redefine and continue the relationship, and to redefine himself in relation to the loss. While these feelings and actions may have been performed in the pre-Internet era, the theory of Continuing Bonds gives them a philosophical grounding, and the space of the social networking site provides a place for their expression.

The mourner's performance of a ritual marking the death of the loved one is the primary expression of loss reconciliation. In general, life and death take place within a sociocultural/religious framework that recognizes transitions from one state of being to another with specific demarcation rituals. In the pre-Internet age, funeral rituals generally occurred in a physical place, and at one particular moment in time. As well, the funeral ritual was often impersonal, reflecting ceremonial and cultural norms not customized to the deceased individual. However, post-Internet life encompasses a multiplicity of cultural and religious influences, and primarily reflects a focus on individualism and inclusivity (Vale-Taylor 2009, Ramshaw 2010, Reeves 2011). Informal rituals have evolved out of the existing social norms of the online space, and tend to unfold in an asynchronous manner as participants learn of the death. The technologies of connection and visibility (e.g., webcams, live video feeds, email, SNSs) make it possible to minimize geographic and temporal barriers to participation in rituals, which in turn casts the rituals as something new. Because of the post-Internet focus on personalization and the incorporation of friends from varying special-interest social communities, these new rituals tend reflect the individuality of the person who died, as well as the community of people in which he functioned. As part of the changing

conception of death, these new rituals continue a connection with the deceased, rather than mark the termination of the relationship. The new rituals of relational continuity with the dead coexist with the pre-existing grieving practices of pre-Internet society. Cultural practices from the pre-Internet era are migrating to contemporary communication mediums; however, there is ambiguity and uncertainty in how these practices are implemented in the SNS environment. This ambiguity manifests in the differing ways in which the dead are remembered and commemorated on SNSs.

In the past, commemoration was a practice that created physical objects: memory books, gravesites, and memorials. These commemorative artifacts are evolving into virtual and asynchronous forms online, even as they carry over some traditional elements. Overall, commemoration serves to honor and remember the dead, as well as to comfort the bereaved. In the new social spaces reflected in SNSs, commemorating the dead often takes the form of an ongoing sharing of stories in the public space of the deceased's social networking profile. In a manifestation potentially unique to the post-Internet era, messages of remembrance are not only addressed directly to the dead, but communicated in a public setting. In this way, the mourners process their grief, interact with the deceased as part of a process of integration into their new identity as bereaved, and join the community of mourners to write the life-story of their loved ones.

PART I. DYING ONLINE

Concept of Death

Death silences the active voice of the individual, but within the social networking site, the voice and presence of the dead are carried onward. How do we conceive of death in the digital age, and how does that differ from how we conceived of it in the past? Before identities were created and expressed on the internet, people wrote books and letters, sent letters to the editor and handed down books full of favorite recipes. Currently, many people write emails and texts, comments on news websites, blogs, and participate in a wide variety of social media. The difference between the previous forms of media and the current ones is that the newer communication media forms allow for many more people to be contacted, connected with, and informed. The breadth and depth of the social groups to which an individual may belong are vastly increased. As ever, death takes place in a social space. However, given the unique properties of SNSs and other communication technologies, the dead manifest a continuing presence through the relationships maintained online by the bereaved. Through this interaction and integration into every day, death has the potential to move into the realm of the mundane. This placement has the potential to cause death to seem less significant, and the integration is often not a seamless process. There is evidence that the integration of the dead into everyday life online, while reassuring to some, causes distress and anxiety to others. Many participants in social networking sites view life is finite, and see the dead as untouchably and irrevocably separate from the living.

What does it mean to die? Gibson (2007: 423) notes that, "making sense of death, framing and containing it within myths, beliefs, stories, moralities and emotions, is part of what human beings do as subjects conscious of mortality." Death takes place within a social framework that gives it meaning. Odom et al. (2010) highlight the idea that ceasing to participate in the social aspect of life can be equivalent to dying, even before biological death occurs. If "social death," i.e., not being a part of a social community, can occur through lack of participation, what is the implication if participation does not cease (or is perceived as continuing)? The long-established view of death as the necessary end to engagement is evolving to match the experience of users encountering the dead in the digital space.

Although death is always experienced through the lens of social interaction, the digital communication space lends itself to representations of the deceased that persist in perpetuity. Walter (2013: 22) notes that "the nature and extent of the social presence of the dead within society depends in part on the information and communication technologies available to that society." In SNSs, the dead have a continued presence in relationships that are propagated by the bereaved. The ability to maintain a friendship in a shared space with someone who is deceased is a product of the ICTs. Odom et al. (2010) speak of social death as the cessation of relationships. However, as long as those relationships still exist, social death does not occur. At a time when social connectivity is omnipresent, the viability of relationships is not dependent on being physical present. Ryan (2008) notes that "one of the curious features of SNSs, unlike most e-mails and all letters, phone calls, and face-to-face conversations, is that a reply is not necessarily expected; communicating to a deceased person online is thus no different from

communicating to a living addressee." This co-presence and relational continuity is potentially unsettling. DeGroot (2012: 208) discusses Sigman's views on how the particular medium of the SNS enables the continuation of relationships in the absence of a living respondent:

> Sigman (1991) claimed that the physical co-presence of two individuals is not a necessary component of relational continuity, and the relationship ends only when communication between the involved parties ceases. People use introspective units of relational continuity to maintain their relationships during times of non-co-presence….Because co-presence is not necessary for a relationship to exist, the permanent, physical absence caused by the death of one party in a relationship does not mean that a relationship no longer continues; relationships can be continuous despite absences of physical and interactional co-presence. Moreover, telecommunications media (including computer-mediated communication) permit this relational co-presence.

If survivors maintain their relationships with the deceased via social media, how is the extension of the relationship experienced? Walter et al. (2012: 292) see the Internet in esoteric terms, as a place that "mimics our metaphysical experience of the dead as being neither there but somehow everywhere yet nowhere in particular."

Ryan (2008), Sigman (1991), and DeGroot (2012) suggest that *online* there is no fundamental difference in interacting with someone who is dead versus someone who is alive, in terms of being able to maintain a friendship. In practice, how does this interaction take place? The profiles of the dead are integrated without any real distinctions into the shared space of social networking sites, a place that Brubaker, Hayes and Dourish (2013) refer to as "broadly public." The bereaved write comments to the dead, updating them on day-to-day happenings as part of the grieving process. De Groot (2012: 206) writes that the bereaved "try to continue with their lives as normally as possible, and part of maintaining normalcy is including the loved one in events."

Brubaker, Hayes and Dourish (2013: 156) draw attention to how this normalcy functions on SNSs in particular: "Facebook's very 'everydayness' enables an expansion of grief into other aspects of life." Mori et al. (2012: 401) note how the integration of the dead into day-to-day life online provides a feeling of comfort for the bereaved; how "referencing the mundanity of everyday life evokes the familiarity of intimacy."

While this intimacy and familiarity can provide solace to the online friends of the deceased, there is also the possibility that the integration of death into everyday activities renders death banal and meaningless. Jones (2004: 86) writes of the possibility that the ubiquity of our social output makes death mundane: "The rapidly changing media landscape makes it easier to preserve our words and images, but perhaps renders them less valuable, as if their very presences causes us to find them less special." Could the lack of any distinction with how death is handled in the digital realm render it less meaningful? Brubaker and Hayes (2011: 127) draw our attention to the juxtaposition of the everyday with the tragic and disruptive, how "comments responding to the owner's death, meanwhile, are immediately preceded by more casual messages that reference lived interactions and events." Does learning of the death of a friend lose its impact if it simply one status update among a long list of comments? On the other hand, the SNSs and other communication media allow us to enlarge the group of people with whom we keep in touch on a regular basis. The person whose death you learned about online might not have been available to you as a friend, were it not for expanded friendship networks made possible by the social networking sites. When the group of bereaved is expanded through participation in SNSs, it is more likely for there to be differences in backgrounds and opinions amongst mourners.

When some online mourners assume that the death of a friend indicates the end of the friendship, and other people seem to take the death in-stride and continue as if nothing within the friendship had changed, uncertainty and uncomfortable feelings could be the end result. The variance in expectations of the mourners may be what Gibson (2007: 415) refers to as "a widening gap and experiential differential between media/technological death culture and 'real life' contexts and temporalities of death and bereavement." Massimi and Baecker (2010) highlight the work that the bereaved undertake when interacting with the profiles of the deceased, in reconciling the continuing online presence of the deceased with the reality of their changed status. The reality is that the friend is dead and has ceased writing posts on his profile wall; however, due to the actions of the family and/or messages written to the deceased by friends, the profile of the deceased person remains active and current. Although Facebook and MySpace currently have policies that give the family of the deceased the choice to "memorialize" the account of the deceased, the continued existence of the profile can be problematic. "The online persistence of the dead helps bring into view a deep ontological contradiction implicit in our dealings with death: the dead both live on as objects of duty and yet completely cease to exist" (Stokes 2012, 363). This uncomfortable contradiction occurred frequently via the institutional reminders common to SNSs. "The often asynchronous nature of Facebook can result in a kind of temporal slippage in which users might reach out to a friend casually on a birthday or in response to a prompt from the system, only to discover that the friend has been dead for weeks or even months" (Brubaker, Hayes and Dourish 2013, 159).

The unsettling circumstance of "temporal slippage" underlines the ways in which the dead are integrated into the shared social space without distinction from the living. Odom et al. (2010:1837) point out that part of the ambiguity arises from the evolving social media themselves and the "lack of established mechanisms to appropriately mark a departed person's account." The lack of clear boundaries to mark the passing of the deceased is disconcerting, in that "online they persist in a liminal space; neither alive nor treated as dead, but rather lingering on in ways not unlike any other user of the system" (Odom et al. 2010, 1837). The users of SNSs are confronted with the continued existence of the dead in a medium in which the users express their day-to-day existence.

To understand the concerns facing the bereaved and the ways in which grieving occurs online, it is necessary to examine the elements that make up the identity of the deceased. If we allow that the SNSs and other communication media have an effect on how we connect with each other, then we must examine how the identities of the deceased are formed in these rapidly evolving online communities.

Identity

To begin, we will examine the concept of identity: who is the person who died, and how is her identity enacted in digital space? We look at three aspects of identity creation to see how practices continue from the past and how they diverge, namely: how identity is created, how identity is continued after death, and the narrative that is created to express the identity of the deceased. Although identity is always created in a social context, the social networking space allows for the active participation of others in the identity-formation process. Identity is not merely individual or singular, it consists of

overlapping modes of being, appropriate to different contexts.

As identity in the SNS does not originate solely from the individual, it has the potential to persist after her demise. In the pre-Internet era, a person's active voice ended when she died—perhaps that is no longer the case. Online, a person navigates a shifting landscape of different social settings; after death, the private realities experienced by the decease are combined into a public space of shared grief.

As a way of coping with grief and making sense of the loss, it is a common practice for the bereaved to establish a narrative of the dead person's life. McAdams (2001) describes the theory of narrative identity: "Individuals form an identity by integrating their life experiences into an internalized, evolving story of the self, which provides the individual with a sense of unity and purpose in life." Who, however, can speak for the dead? Online, the deceased (through her former words and thoughts), the family of the deceased, and her friends all speak simultaneously, resulting in the potential for conflicting narratives.

In the social network space as described by boyd and Ellison (2007) and Brubaker, Hayes and Dourish (2013), identity is formed (in part) by associating yourself with communities that reflect your interests and connections, and by actively participating in those communities. Gibson (2007) draws our attention to the idea that the creation of the self is a form of public (or public within a bounded community) performance. Garde-Hansen (2009: 147) highlights the interactive nature of the narrative identity that is created in the public space;

> It [the SNS] is a space where users can narrativise their lives as well as an archive of messages between users and thus embodies evidence of the production of

> personal identity through social interaction that takes into account the multiple pasts and presents that the user has occupied/is occupying.

This insight is echoed by Braman, Dudley and Vincenti (2011: 187), in that "one's profile and online presence is partially an amalgam of the posts and connections of other users along with the content they post and create themselves and maintain." In other words, identity becomes a form of communally-produced content. In Walter's view (2013: 19), this output is open to interpretation and co-creation; "online content is not mine or yours but ours, and we all have the right to modify it." From this perspective, the previously-expressed voice of the deceased is only one aspect of her online identity.

The narrative identity that is created collaboratively in life is extended in death. Brubaker and Vertesi (2010: 154) describe the identity that is propagated on the profile wall of the deceased: "Postmortem SNS profiles are techno-spiritual spaces in which the identities of the deceased are inter-subjectively produced by the contributions of SNS friends." In addition to identity being carried forward on the social networking site through the actions of online friends, Walter et al. (2012: 292) remark that, "online, the dead continue as social actors." As we explored in the concept of death, "social death" is the lack of participation, and it is possible for the deceased to maintain a presence online that can be viewed as participatory. Not only does identity remain as a socially constructed, interactive force, but the dead seem to exercise agency within the community. Walter (2013: 20) writes how SNSs allows "the dead themselves the possibility of becoming more vibrantly present among their network of family and friends," and "apps are now available that enable you to send, from the grave, timed greetings (such as birthday greetings) to those you love." Walter echoes the sense of

presence alluded to by Stokes (2012: 367):

> What Facebook profiles of the dead seem to suggest is that our social identities are not necessarily coextensive with the biological life of the individual human organism with which they are associated, and thus it is not the *memory* of the dead person that is being honored and sustained through this form of memorialization, but some dimension or extension of *the dead person themselves* [sic].

The idea that digital space has elements that mediate the experience of the users is linked to Stoke's implication that we interact with the deceased themselves. Stokes (2012: 369) discusses an online "sort of 'extended phenomenality' that allows the living individual to project their [sic] identity – including, to a certain extent, their [sic] corporeality and the more intangible elements of their [sic] being in the world – allowing for mediated presence across physical distance." Haskins (2007) also indicates that there is a unique quality to interaction (specifically the archival aspect of digital memory) on the SNSs that influences how we experience presence.

Social network site users perceiving the continued presence of the dead is one issue, but the dead having a perpetual – almost viral – existence, is another. Braman, Dudley and Vincenti (2011: 191) write of the entanglement between our physical lives and our technological identities, and how "the implications of our interactions far surpass our physical demise." Walter et al. (2012, 284) note the immortal nature of digital data (leaving aside the potential problems of data migration and bit rot), and point out that, "once online material is copied by others, the author cannot retrieve ownership; the material may continue in cyberspace even if the original site is removed." This digital immortality has an effect on the way that the narrative identity of the deceased is created and expressed. As Grider (2007) writes, creating the identity of the deceased online

"depends less on the implied eternity of a built physical environment than on the entirely different eternity of circulating information."

How do we move from a potentially unending online self with facets expressed in multifarious contexts, to the postmortem creation of a singular identity narrative for the deceased? Gibson (2007) notes that peoples' deaths may be "uniquely their own," but we also must consider that the death takes place within a social context. A common practice following the death of a loved one is for the bereaved to fix a sense of her identity and the story of her life (Brubaker, Hayes and Dourish, 2013; Harvey et al., 2001). This narrative creation serves a structural role within the cultural drama of the bereaved. Brubaker and Hayes (2011: 124), speaking of obituaries (a form of postmortem narrative identity creation) note that, "these written summaries serve to validate and memorialize the deceased relative to current social ideals and expectations." In his work *The Past is a Foreign Country*, David Lowenthal observes that "the past is integral to our sense of identity….Ability to recall and identify with our own past gives existence meaning, purpose, and value." The impetus for creating a narrative and identity seems rooted in the grieving process and serves a cultural role in defining not only the deceased in relation to cultural standards and ideals, but also the bereaved in relation to the deceased.

Since we have established that the bereaved desire to define the identity of the deceased in the form of a narrative, the question remains, who has the right to speak on behalf of the dead? Walter (2013) succinctly asks, "Which collective – family, community, government – controls the performance by which the dead are remembered?" Legally, the issue has become clearer over time, but policies regarding the disposition of the account of the deceased vary by SNS service provider (e.g., Facebook, MySpace,

Twitter, Google+): Facebook's termination/memorialization policy states that "Verified immediate family members may request the removal of a loved one's account from the site" (Facebook Help Center FAQs). "Family" is the recognized owner of the profile, and can determine whether or not it becomes memorialized or taken down (removed from the site altogether). From a legal perspective, the family (or legal heirs) of the deceased have the right to remove the profile, however, the power to destroy does not necessarily legitimize ownership.

The issue of symbolic ownership of the profile is also ambiguous. Brubaker and Hayes (2011: 125) note that "SNS profiles are created by the deceased instead of by a third-party. This raises questions about management of the account and symbolic ownership of the space." As well, the profiles "were created by the dead and are appropriated by potentially diverse groups of survivors with disparate needs" (Brubaker and Hayes 2011, 131). We return to the idea of the dead having a continuing presence, as Walter (2010: 2) points out that the deceased may participate in the creation of this narrative: "Each communication technology affords possibilities for the dead to help legitimate and construct particular social groups and institutions."

Even if one assumes that the dead continue to speak (with regard to their past preferences and expressions), the continuing conversations on their profile pages are carried out through the posts of the bereaved. In this instance, "the experiences and opinions shared on the deceased's Wall equate to speaking for the dead" (Brubaker, Hayes and Dourish 2013, 159). In essence the narrative is created in the public space of the individual's wall. The reason that this SNS location is important is that the means to limit what is said on the profile page, and by whom, is functionally limited to the friends

already to connected to the individual at the time the account was memorialized. In other words, the family, who in the past would have had the sole right to establish the narrative of the deceased's life, no longer has control over the community of friends who gather on the deceased's page to share remembrances and create the story of who they saw their friend to be, unless the family chooses to shut the profile down completely. Haskins (2007: 406) notes that:

> The internet levels the traditional hierarchy of author-text-audience, thereby distributing authorial agency among various institutions and individuals involved in the production of content and prevent any one agent from imposing narrative and ideological closure upon the data.

Due to the fact that a person may be viewed in different lights by different social groups, this may produce multiple and conflicting narratives of the deceased (Brubaker, Hayes and Dourish 2013). This is not a surprising outcome, as the concept of the deceased held by parents and close family offline may be very different from that of friends (both close and casual) who interacted with the person on a daily basis online and shared a wealth of minutiae of variable depth and intimacy. "Friends often elaborate postmortem identities by sharing memories and content, raising questions about how best to negotiate differences between the narratives of the bereaved from various parts of the deceased's life" (Brubaker, Hayes and Dourish 2013, 161). The variability in these postmortem identities reflects the changing concept of identity in terms of what is private and what is public. Palen and Dourish (2003), drawing upon Altman's privacy and technology framework, suggest that what is considered "private" changes depending on the view of temporality in different social groups and different contexts. In sharing these narratives in a SNS, these differing ideas of the identity of the deceased, and what his or

her life meant, can overlap in ways that cause friction to the bereaved. Just as the identity of the deceased was formed within the communal context of the social network site, so is the community of the mourners created through their individual connections to the deceased.

Mourners

Who are the mourners of the dead, online? Prior to the prevalence of information communication technologies, the status of the bereaved was arranged hierarchically with the nuclear family comprising the chief or principal mourners, more distant family and close family friends on the next tier, and then social contacts and colleagues on the bottom rung. This division implied that there were privileges in feeling or expression that were inherent to each rank.

Today, the changing face of social interaction online has had a significant leveling effect; the community of mourners encompasses everyone the deceased counted in her social circle (including many individuals who might previously have been considered "disenfranchised" grievers). The community created by the death of a loved one or friend is impartial in nature, lacking the privilege accorded to family primacy. In this postmodern, highly interconnected era, and in alignment with the general trend of informality in place of ceremony, mourning is publicly expressed. Due to the heterogeneity of the bereaved and the social space in which the mourning takes place, conflicts inevitably emerge. These conflicts concern the different modes of expression and what is considered "appropriate" mourning behavior. However, it appears that these conflicts represent a generational divide between pre-Internet people and digital natives.

In the pre-Internet model, the bereaved closest genetically to the deceased were privileged above other mourners; Massimi and Baecker (2011) envision this hierarchy as a "set of concentric circles, with inner circles designating higher levels of openness and trust with respect to the loss." Mori et al. (2012: 400) mark the physical aspects of the pre-Internet era stratification in the artifacts of mourning: "The condolence book separates the bereaved into two classes – those that receive the condolences (typically family) and those that offer condolences (typically friends, acquaintances)." This sense of ranking and hierarchy stems from "the issues of entitlement with respect to who ought to be considered 'bereaved,' and the socially and morally appropriate actions that ought to follow suit" (Odom et al., 2010, 1837). In other words, in a pre-ICT time when connections were familial and limited in geographic scope, the people most closely affected by a death were the immediate family - and the family was primarily the sole group given the respect, support and understanding due to the bereaved. Family-affiliation is a known quality; a default. Outside "family" is a nebulous area of relationships that are negotiated in a fluid and facile way (often on a daily basis), facilitated by this social networking capability.

In contrast to the stratification of mourners found in the pre-existing social model, the new group of mourners online potentially encompasses everyone who participated in the deceased's life. This inclusion takes into account mourners who might otherwise not have been invited or allowed into the circle of the bereaved or the ceremonies of loss. This group of mourners may have been previously unknown to each other, and/or consist of individuals from different social groups to which the deceased belonged. "Urbanization, longevity and geographical mobility mean that, compared to pre-industrial

times, main mourners are typically no longer co-resident, while the complexity of modern social networks can mean that lesser mourners may not even know each other" (Walter 2013, 19). Brubaker, Hayes and Dourish (2013: 161) describe how the phenomenon of social expansion (i.e., the ability to connect with friends who may not be co-located) and the lack of rank or advantage in the online space where these connections occur, is a unique product of SNSs:

> This expansion is enabled by the large number of friends with whom users maintain connections and the limited ways provided by sites like Facebook to separate various facets of a user's life. Thus, this social expansion also serves as a functional collapse of distinction between social groups and contexts.

Brubaker and Hayes (2011: 131) see that the social space of the SNS as reflecting the existing relationships of the deceased, not necessarily something ephemeral or illusory: "Because SNSs often replicate existing offline social networks, MySpace may serve to augment, rather than replace, communication patterns surrounding the death of a loved one." We have a setting where an individual interacts with different groups of friends, and participates in different communities that may have no awareness of each other, and no point of connection other than the one person. When that individual dies, the disparate groups are brought together on his profile wall as a community of mourners, bringing all the different aspects of his life into conjunction, possibly for the first time.

The social networks inhabited by the deceased join together to form a community of mourners of equal status. Walter et al. (2012: 289) (drawing upon the work of Brubaker and Hayes 2011) wrote that:

> Pre-modern societies tended to produce a bereaved community, modern societies tend to produce bereaved individuals, and post-modern mutual help groups

> (online or offline) produce a community of the bereaved, that is, connections with previously unknown others who have suffered the same category of loss….SNSs such as Facebook, however, can produce what pre-modernity did: a bereaved community. This is because SNSs provide an arena in which all of a person's friends, colleagues, and family members can interact, or at least know of each other's existence. This continues even if a person dies, or is bereaved. A person's diverse mourners may not be co-resident, but on Facebook many of them may be co-present. The person's social networks are thus de-fragmented, and mourning re-emerges as a group experience.

To reiterate, the death of one individual "transforms a collection of passersby into a community" of mourners; their relationship to each other founded in shared friendship to the deceased (Haskins 2007, 409). Gibson (2007: 422) notes that the social networking sites allow these previously unknown people to share the intensity of mourning with each other, specifically, "it enables very personal and intimate communication to take place between strangers who may or may not become identified as friends." As the moment of death collapses the various social networks into one shared community of grief online, the distinctions between family and friend, and between close friend and acquaintance, are mooted.

Before the technological affordances of the internet made access and connection more democratic, the stratification of mourners excluded some people who considered themselves bereaved. Doka (1989) and Romanoff and Terenzio (1998: 704) discuss disenfranchised grievers; those who are "denied access to the communal support offered by transition rituals, because society fails to either acknowledge their relationship to the deceased or the legitimacy of their grief, or stigmatizes the death." In the present, however, the community of the bereaved encompasses these mourners, for example, same-sex partners, school friends, non-formalized relationship partners, or friends who shared obscure or illegal interests (Sofka 2009, Walter et al. 2012).

With the community of mourners established by the death of a loved one online, it follows that the mourning takes place in the relatively public space of the SNS. Brubaker, Hayes and Dourish (2012: 153) discuss the collapse between private and public modes of grieving and how the merging of these two states relates to an ongoing cultural shift: "But where the modern experience is one in which private and public lives exist in relative isolation, postmodernism 'conflates the public and the private' (Walter 1994, 41)." Mourning is the public performance of a private emotional experience; in the past, mourning might have been a private, internal affair, or conducted along ceremonial or religious lines. In practice (and in accord with the changing Internet-era conception of death), today the mourning activities are integrated into everyday life online:

> In these sites [Facebook and MySpace], pictures of the dead, conversations with the dead, and mourners' feelings can and do become part of the everyday online world. A digital RIP on one's Facebook indicates one is in mourning. The dead and their mourners are no longer secluded from the rest of society (Walter et al. 2012, 285).

As Walter et al. note, "Death is irreducibly physical, but it is also social" (2012, 275-276). The ritual practices that mourners use to express their solidarity with other online mourners evolve within the social space of the SNS. "I asked one of my students why she'd changed her profile photo. 'It was spontaneous,' she said. 'Once one person did it, we all joined in.'…That's when she first saw the practice of posting Facebook profile photos of oneself with the person being mourned" (Stone 2010). Because of the visual and highly interconnected nature of the social networking sites, the actions of one mourner can spread throughout the community and, through general adoption, become a normal practice. These spontaneously evolving practices may place the needs and

expected behavioral norms of different groups of mourners at odds with each other.

Because the community of mourners online includes family members, friends, acquaintances, and colleagues, it is not surprising that the members of this varied group have varying emotional needs. While there are many who would reach out to their friends online in a time of grief, others from an older, pre-Internet period, who have formed most of their connections and support network through face-to-face encounters and physical proximity, may find the very size and omnipresence of the group of other mourners to be overwhelming. One of the primary concerns is protecting the close family members and dearest friends from an onslaught of information and emotion at a time when they are feeling defenseless. In studying the requirements of the mourning community, Massimi (2011: 29) discovers some reasons why mourners might turn away from the Internet: "While it is true that the bereaved often find comfort and strength from their interactions with other people, there are many times where isolation, disconnection, and silence are preferred." Walter et al. (2012: 291) speak of the separation from the bereaved from everyday life: "Sequestration [of the mourners] works both ways (Petersson 2010), protecting not only everyday life from the fear of death and the pain of grief, but also mourners from the profanities and mundanities of everyday life." However, given the community in which the deceased participated, this freedom from anxiety and intrusion may be possible only offline. "The desire to grieve privately also raises issues when discussing the death of a loved one on a platform designed to broadcast the thoughts and feelings of its users" (Brubaker, Hayes and Dourish 2013, 157). As these authors point out, social networking has a particular aesthetic and tone that some mourners may find jarring.

The primary conflict that emerges from the different social groups who interact in the community of mourners centers on discomfort with the idiomatic, less formal, style of interaction common to SNSs. Walter et al. (2012: 279) draw our attention to the generational divide online, and the varying level of comfort with publicity versus privacy, and that "settings need to reflect the various levels of disclosure that humans desire with different groups of family, friends, and acquaintances (Stiller & Dunbar 2007). Online, older adults seem much more concerned with these distinctions than do young people." Brubaker, Hayes and Dourish (2013: 160) note that there is an awareness of pre-Internet norms surrounding "appropriate behavior in funerary and memorial spaces," and that conflicts between mourners often result from the juxtaposition of the worldviews of these different social groups: "This inclusion [of marginalized grievers] is accompanied by varied opinions and anxieties about how best to behave on SNSs in relationship to the experience of death."

> Diverse grief reactions can be displayed online to a much wider social network of friends and acquaintances, so one would predict an increase in felt disturbance at how others deal with grief. And if offline there have always been etiquettes for expressing condolences, what kinds of condolence netiquettes are emerging, and with what degree of consensus? (Walter et al. 2012, 291)

Stone (2010) highlights the uncomfortable sensation of living in a moment when social mores are shifting: "Traditional mourning is governed by conventions. But in the age of Facebook, with selfhood publicly represented via comments and uploaded photos, was it OK for her friends to display joy or exuberance online?" DeGroot (2012: 198), drawing upon the work of Suler (2004) and Walther and Boyd (2002), suggests that some of the concerns arise from the nature of SNSs themselves, in that, via the lack of

face-to-face contact, they depersonalize communication; thus "grieving online is 'safe' interpersonally, and people might be less inhibited when discussing topics." Although some mourners online may feel that some modes of interaction are inappropriate for expressing the feelings of grief and loss, it is nevertheless true that the mourning is taking place in a social space with established informal and egalitarian norms. The informality and lack of inhibition that often characterize communication on social networking sites carry over in the expressions of the mourners who are accustomed to this style of interaction. "Grief expressed through the deceased's pre-existing Facebook pages may thus be read by a wide range of other mourners, and may also lead to conflict as different grieving styles or different estimates of the deceased's character clash" (Walter et al. 2011). The mourners, drawn together in grief over the loss of a loved one, come from various social groups, in addition to family members. The different ages and backgrounds of the mourners are reflected in the expectations that each group has for norms of expression. These differences in grieving styles are the subject of the second part of this paper, the evolution of grieving practices online.

PART II. GRIEVING PRACTICES

To reiterate, Part I of this paper deals with laying the foundations for discussing grieving practices in social networking sites. We have explored what it means to die, who it is that dies, and who mourns the dead. We have also looked at ways in which pre-Internet beliefs and behaviors have carried over to the new online medium, and the ways in which the medium has implications towards transforming the expressions of grief to fit its own rapidly evolving customs and vernacular. Grief is generally understood to be a multi-faceted emotional response to significant loss; the Oxford English Dictionary defines grief as "deep sorrow, especially that caused by someone's death." In addition to the emotional component, grief can also have physical, cognitive, social and philosophical aspects. Grieving and bereavement can be understood as the emotional aspects of grief, and rituals and commemoration as the physical and social manifestations of the response to profound loss. In this section, we will examine what it means to grieve, and the rituals and social forms that people use online to process their grief and remember the deceased.

Grieving

The remembrances that mourners share on SNSs express their feelings of grief and loss. However, the medium (i.e., web-based SNSs) in which they experience and understand their grief has changed. In the twentieth century model of death and dying, grief is a stage that the bereaved pass through on their way to acceptance; the death of a loved one is something to "get over" (Gibson 2007). From this point of view, people

who persist overlong in grieving or remembering the dead are maladjusted. In contrast to this idea of death and grieving, new research was conducted and theories were proposed on the cusp of the 21st century. This new theory is Continuing Bonds, wherein the mourner redefines his relationship to the deceased and continues the connection on a new footing. From this view, the deceased are integrated into the everyday life of the bereaved, and maintaining a connection between the mourner and the deceased is healthy and productive. Let us examine the previously established theories of grief, and how they have come to change over time.

The old theory of "the work of grieving" arose, in part, from Sigmund Freud's paper *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917). Silverman (2005), in the Encyclopedia of Death and Dying, notes that "grief, as Freud saw it, freed the mourner from his or her attachments to the deceased, so that when the work of mourning was completed, mourners were free to move ahead and become involved in new relationships." This 20th century psychological perspective on the self was reflected in the work of Elizabeth Kübler-Ross in the 1970s, based on her experiences spending time with people who were dying (i.e. the five stages of coming to terms with death: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance). Brubaker and Hayes (2011: 124) note that although it is "not prescriptive, this model can be seen as a loose pathway through the emotional process of coming to terms with and accepting death." Massimi, Dimond and Dantec (2012: 719) note that, although there is social pressure for the bereaved to pass through grief in a feasible amount of time and return to ordinary functioning as quickly as possible, this recovery is not always possible: "The disruption to individual and domestic normalcy often outlives any public forms of mourning and acknowledgement." The pre-existing

concept of grief saw the unwillingness of the bereaved to sever connection to the deceased as profoundly dysfunctional. "People should move on from the death of a loved one by detaching themselves emotionally. Failure to do so is seen as pathological grief" (Getty et al. 2011, 998). In this model, grieving has stages, and the normal, healthy mourner passes through these stages in order to process the death and proceed onward with his life. However, what if this approach actually has no therapeutic or scientific basis? George Bonanno's research on resilience in loss, trauma and bereavement in the 1990s established that there was no scientific basis to the idea of grief processed in stages, or in a Freudian idea of grief through which one worked. His major finding, as outlined in his book *The Other Side of Sadness: What the New Science of Bereavement Tells Us About Life After Loss* (2009) is that grief is multi-modal, coping mechanisms are particular to the individual, and that the majority of people dealing with grief are incredibly resilient.

The new ways of looking at grief involve an acknowledgement that one does not need to disconnect from the deceased in order to go forward with one's life. "The living often attempt to renegotiate their identities by continuing or maintaining bonds with the deceased, as people generally do not forget their friends just because they are dead" (DeGroot 2012, 204). Massimi and Baecker (2011) highlight the shift in understanding by noting that "grief is a *process* without a clear end. In other words, it is a permanent change in worldview." Romanoff and Terenzio (1998: 699) note the mourner's need for both transformation of her self-identity as a result of the loss, and continuity with the pre-

death self, in the form of "continuation of an intrapsychic connection with the deceased within a communal context."

These connections find their best expression in the Continuing Bonds theory proposed by Klass, Silverman and Nickman in their 1996 book, *Continuing Bonds: New Understandings of Grief*. Brubaker, Hayes and Dourish (2013: 153) describe the functioning of the theory thusly: "Individuals establish an inner representation of the deceased to maintain a link or even develop a new relationship postmortem. The nature of the bond is dynamic and ongoing, impacted by the survivor's belief system." Romanoff and Terenzio (1998: 700), citing the work of Schuchter and Zisook (1993), describe how creating the inner representation of the deceased allows the bereaved to create a new bond via shared characterizations, memories and associations. "The bereaved will note a continuing sense of the deceased's presence and continuing relatedness with the deceased in his or her intrapsychic life." In other words, the mourner creates an internal sense of the deceased as a presence, with which he interacts *as with* the deceased. It is this introjection that enables the relationship with the deceased to be maintained. Getty et al. (2011: 998) also offer an explanation for what purpose this relationship serves: "Death disrupts but does not need to end a personal relationship. A continuing relationship with the deceased represents a different kind of relationship situated in entirely changed circumstances."

Although the theory of Continuing Bonds was developed prior to the widespread use of the Internet, and well before the development and adoption of social networking sites as a place for creating and maintaining community, this theory shows how SNSs

function to allow the dead to play a continuing role in people's lives and that, for mourners, forging a new relationship with the deceased is psychologically healthy. Jones (2004: 87) notes the human need to connect with each other is not diminished by our increasing technological sophistication: "As we move into newer media and experience still newer media technologies…we will no doubt increase the quantity of the means of presence, but our desire to remember and be remembered, and our need to grieve, have not, and will not, change." As the need to grieve and remember doesn't change, then the change takes place in either the expression and/or the medium of the grieving.

Brubaker, Hayes and Dourish (2013, 152) make the point that confronting death involves interacting in a social environment, and that SNSs are novel in that: "Facebook creates a new setting for death and grieving – one that is broadly public with an ongoing integration into daily life." In the view of Walter et al. (2012, 295), social death differs from physical death in that it is not necessarily inevitable: "After physical death, for mourners who are digitally connected, cyberspace provides a remarkable new medium for conversing with the dead, enabling their ongoing presence to be as much social as private." In this quote, Walter et al. are alluding to the fact that social is conflated as public, as contrasted to private. The reality is that the online mourner always has the option of writing private messages to the deceased, but the majority of messages are written on the profile wall, a public space visible to anyone who was friends with the deceased (online).

Throughout this grieving process, the mourners are not pretending that the dead are still alive; they are not expecting the dead to respond, howsoever much the grievers

might wish. There is an awareness they are interacting with the dead as part of the process of adjusting to their loss. "Their online 'friendship' connections persist, and thus the model of their social relationships created while they lived is…unchanged. In effect, the online identity created when the user was alive has become unresponsive, but it remains extant in a very similar form to before" (Stokes 2012, 366). Stokes (2012, 367) describes this interaction as providing a "sense of *continued* presence after death." The profile and space created by the deceased still exists, and the bereaved can derive comfort from spending time reminiscing on the profile wall of the deceased. Vale-Taylor (2009: 538) points out that, per Klass et al., "such bonds are not denial but rather that the deceased can provide resources for enriched living in the present day." The Continuing Bonds theory and the role of the deceased in the everyday lives of the bereaved gives us a sense of the changes that have occurred in the ways in which we handle grief now, as opposed to a pre-Internet, pre-SNS era.

Ritual

One way survivors handle the death of a loved one is through participation in ritual and ceremonial activities. Rituals exist within a cultural framework; they serve to demarcate states of being, e.g., child/adult, not-married/married, alive/dead. Funereal rituals are cultural and social ceremonies that place the deceased within the framework of the religious belief system, or express class and social bonds; they honor the dead, but also comfort the bereaved. In the pre-ICT context, a ritual is an event that takes place at one time and place; a potential participant is either present or absent, and repetition of the

ritual dilutes its sacral nature. In the social network environment, participants are developing new rituals, enabled by communication technologies that have the potential to minimize spatial and temporal barriers to participation. These new rituals reflect the post-Internet trend towards personalization that reifies the identity of the deceased, and also continue the participant's relationship with the dead, rather than mark its passing. Before we examine contemporary online grieving practices, we will look at the role rituals play in the process of coming to terms with loss.

Culture and society transmit expectations of behavior and emotion that take on specific forms, which serve to mark significant passages from one state of being to another. When people come together to mourn the loss of a loved one, part of the practice of grieving involves a ritual to honor and remember the deceased. Romanoff and Terenzio (1998: 698) think that rituals serve to reinforce social groupings, and help mourners "comprehend the complex and contradictory aspects of human existence within a given social context." In practice, how does this process of reinforcement and comprehension work? What actions or symbols does a ritual contain that designate it as this kind of activity? In the opinion of Romanoff and Terenzio (1998: 698), rituals are performed (either publicly or privately), and use symbols that contain "condensed versions of private emotionally charged material or contain societally constructed meanings." This definition implies that the symbols and meanings evoked in a ritual are unique to the social group of the mourning community (and, presumably, of the deceased). This focus on the mourning community and the needs of the bereaved is an important part of the ritual practice. Romanoff and Terenzio (1998: 698), referring to the work of Pine (1989), also note that "funeral rituals mediate the transition of the deceased

from life to death, and they mediate the transition of the bereaved from one social status to another." The ritual acknowledges the fact that the deceased is no longer a living member of the community, and it also confers upon the survivors and loved ones the designation of "bereaved." These titles have a private, personal function, as well the performance of a role within the larger community.

Grief is a private emotion, but ritual is the means by which it is expressed publicly. Massimi and Baecker (2011) note that there are communal forms of grieving, wherein the ritual gives support to the mourner at a vulnerable time.

> *Group/prescriptive* types of grief activities are those which are shared among a larger social group and come with significant structure intact….The mourner does not need to plan the activity. Instead, the steps and materials are prescribed by engaging in the ritual. The focus is on acknowledging that other people are experiencing the same kinds of feelings, and that there is communal support.

This quote highlights supportive behaviors and the assumption that others in the community will step in to help the mourners because the members of the community understand the need that is being signaled by the funeral rite. However, as Konigsberg (2011) points out, even as some of the more physical manifestations of mourning are no longer in use (e.g., black armbands, black-edged stationary or visiting cards), "they have been replaced by conventions for grief, which are arguably more restrictive in that they dictate not what a person wears or does in public but his or her inner emotional state." This idea of the inner emotional state is tied to the general western socio-cultural focus on the individual, and his or her emotional response to events. Although Konigsberg implies that the conventions of grief have been turned inward to govern the feelings of the bereaved, this assertion is countered by the fact that communities on SNSs tend

towards inclusivity and acceptance rather than judgment and strict rules for emotional expression (boyd and Ellison 2007, Walter 2010).

Given that postmodern western culture is fixated on the individual, there is the potential, as Ramshaw (2009: 174) points out, that the ceremonial ritual forms do not engage the feelings of the bereaved: "If I come to a ritual with strong feelings and difficult questions about a particular death and the ritual neither houses the true feelings nor honors the questions nor names the uniqueness of my loss, I am likely to leave feeling empty and depressed." The pre-existing funerary rituals can work if the participants are part of that social and cultural world and value the ceremonial practices of that worldview (Ramshaw 2009, McIntee 1998). In other words, a traditional funeral ceremony using religious symbols and metaphors of death and dying may provide comfort for a group of people who adhere to that belief system. By contrast, a generation which has grown up without much exposure to those symbols or ceremonies may find them alienating and may be unable to find solace in the ritual. For many cohorts, however, the funeral rite signifies the transition of the deceased from living to dead, using the symbols and meanings particular to the community of mourners, helping mourners find comfort in collective grief and ceremony.

The newly developing rituals in SNSs reflect a much less formal social milieu than that of the pre-Internet era. The new forms of ritual reflect the diverse and vibrant social space of the SNS and the communities that are formed there; rituals online have a much less formal and prescriptive format. The first aspect of the funeral ritual to be significantly altered by modern communication media is the temporal and spatial fixity of the ceremony itself, where, in the past, participation was limited to those close family

members who had the means and time to attend the funeral. In the post-Internet age, the technological affordances of live video streams, video-conferencing, display of the deceased's Facebook page at the funeral, using Facebook for hosting proxy funerals, and digitally recording events for later viewing allow the people present at a funeral event to be much more representative of the deceased's entire social community (Pitsillides, Katsikides and Conreen 2009; Carroll and Landry 2010; Walter et al. 2012; Brubaker, Hayes and Dourish 2013). Per Walter et al. (2012: 281), technology (in the form of electronic communication) not only facilitates the presence of mourners at funeral events, but it is also used to find the personal details (e.g., stories, sense of humor, hobbies, favorite sports and musical groups) that contextualize the funeral ritual in the life of the deceased and "facilitates its [e.g., the personalized funeral] spread and its evolution into a co-production between family and participant." Overall, communication technology that connects people online also allows them to connect in ritual practices to mark the deaths of loved ones.

The second primary characteristic of the new rituals of grief online is that they reflect the unique qualities of the deceased. Ramshaw (2009: 172) draws attention to the focus on personality as a sign of an overall cultural shift:

> This equation of "meaningful" with "personal" is a giveaway of postmodern culture. When people are not embedded in a tradition-bearing community, the rituals of such a community do not seem to speak to their personal experience, the private world that is the locus of meaning-making. A ritual is likely to be meaningful to the extent that it is personally constructed or tailored to one's own experience.

In this view, the post-Internet person is without benefit of culturally-transmitted rituals, and the only type of ceremony that has significance is one that she has had a hand in

creating. The personalization of the ritual both honors the dead individual, and, in Ramshaw's view (2009, 171), makes the ritual more "meaningful" and palatable for the bereaved, better meeting the aim of the ritual. "The desire for personalized ritual is linked in American minds with the desire for 'celebrative' ritual with an upbeat emotional tone…personalization may make the rituals more able to meet some of the most important needs of grieving people." Michiko Kakutani (2001) of the *New York Times* wrote about the spontaneous displays that sprang up in NYC following the destruction of the World Trade Center: "This is how America grieves today: not just in private prayer in churches and synagogues, but with personal displays of grief, made public – on the street, on Web sites, on TV." This pattern of private grief, displayed publicly, serves as the key to membership in the larger community of mourners (e.g., the floral display at Buckingham Palace following the death of Princess Diana, or the more recent memorials involving teddy bears and toys for the victims of elementary school massacres).

In addition to personalization being a hallmark of the new forms of the funeral rite, informality is the other aspect of the new rituals reflecting online community norms. Vale-Taylor (2009) sees the importance of informal rituals in that they "occur and serve to sustain people in the context of their daily lives." An excellent example of how informality is viewed by digital natives comes from the research of Odom et al. (2010, 1837-1838) into the grieving practices of teenagers on SNSs:

> P2 compares attending her friend's funeral and later visiting an online memorial website, 'I went to Al's funeral, which was okay but I didn't have a chance to talk to many people. So, it was a shared experience in the sense that we were all there, but there was no kind of interaction for me. But, this [memorial] website was more interactive in the sense that I could write what I wanted to say and other

> people could read it and I could read what they had to say….I found that valuable…to be aware of all of the different dimensions of relationships this person had with others.'

In addition to post-Internet rituals representing the deceased in a less formal style, the new ceremonial actions also reflect the new concept of death not being the end to the relationship, but reflect a change in how the relationship is manifested. As Brubaker, Hayes and Dourish (2013, 160) point out, "we see the interweaving of death and grieving into the everyday, rather than in the temporally bound settings of traditional funerals and memorials." The new rituals of the digital natives reflect the desire for continuing connection with the deceased. In Vale-Taylor's (2009: 537) view, informal rituals created by the bereaved hold more personal significance for them, and that rituals are performed to establish a link with the deceased, and remember and honor him within the social group. However, "the most common reason for choosing a ritual was to keep a bond with the deceased or ensure that the deceased was remembered by others." This relational continuity (based on the Continuing Bonds theory of grief) is highlighted in DeGroot (2012), and Romanoff and Terenzio (1998:706) with the idea that "the bereaved maintain relationships with the deceased by continuing interaction with inner representations and with a transformed self." In essence, rituals arise and are performed within the shared social space, as part of the process of the mourners accepting the death of a loved one. If grieving is the emotional state and ritual is the performance of the emotion within a public space, then commemoration is the product of the grieving ritual. Commemoration (i.e., remembering together) is the communal action taken by mourners online.

Commemoration

Commemoration serves to honor and remember the deceased. The established forms of commemoration common to the pre-SNS era (e.g., memory books and memorials) are evolving into new, asynchronous, and participatory configurations. These newer forms may represent a transitional state, since they carry over some aspects of the pre-existing model. Fundamentally, the new commemorative formations continue to serve as comfort for the bereaved. The primary form this comfort takes is sharing memories and anecdotes about the deceased. A feature which is particular to the new model of grieving developed, however, out of the norms of the SNS space; messages of remembrance are communicated to the deceased directly, and in a public setting.

Walter (2013) speaks of the ability to remember as the constituting element of community, as it involves the invocation of ancestors and the experience of membership. This act of remembering echoes the examination of identity, and the need of the grieving community to create a narrative for the deceased: "Remembering in community also fulfilled a need to give meaning to the deceased's life, and many expressed the view that it was important to keep the deceased's name in the public eye in some kind of permanent format" (Vale-Taylor 2009, 540). Stokes (2012: 375) highlights the singular ability of current information communication technology for insuring that the narrative created for the loved one which reflects her "particularity and unique value" does not vanish following her death: "Persisting electronic presence seems to be a powerful tool for effecting such a rescue." Commemorating the dead preserves their place within the community.

Remembering the dead is a vital component of the mourning process, but how is this practice enacted? Communication technology has facilitated the expression of commemoration on different platforms and media, including memorial webpages, funeral home guestbooks, memorial groups on SNS – especially in the sense that virtual memorials on SNSs are not subject to the same restrictions on cost, size, or room for graphics (Jones 2004; Foot, Warnick & Schneider 2006, DeGroot 2012). Jones (2004: 85) pays attention to how the opportunities presented by the Internet allow for greater access and participation in commemorative activities:

> In some ways we have not put the Internet any differently in service of remembrance, of grieving, than we had old media, although new media scale more easily. Getting support and attention by the bereaved, for example, is a common thing online, as is the construction of memorials. More people participate in these activities and use more varied means to do so than were able to participate using old media.

The increased use of communication technologies and SNSs means that the community of mourners who gather to commemorate the deceased online is larger and more heterogeneous than was previously possible.

The practice of commemoration straddles a middle-ground where some conventions of expression from the pre-ICT era are viewed as applicable for the new medium (e.g., social networking sites), although that trend is shifting. Mori et al. (2012: 400) speak to the expectation that condolences should be expressed in "text of a more formal and grammatically correct kind, whereas the still emerging and more vernacular protocols associated with posting to MySpace and YouTube call for text that is much more informal and conversational." One of the problems in the shift between formal and informal modes of communication is the context in which the communication occurs.

"Content posted prior to the death takes on new meanings for Anna's friends as it is reinterpreted after death…. challenges [arise] surrounding what content is appropriate or meaningful to repurpose in commemoration" (Mori et al. 2012, 399). It can be jarring and sobering to see the tone of the messages on a user's profile switch between informal updates about homework and kitten videos to formal expressions of remembrance and sorrow, without an intervening explanation of what has occurred.

Despite the potential for encountering discordant expressions on the profile wall, the deceased's memorialized profile, and the messages of affection and commemoration posted there, often serve as a source of comfort to the community of mourners online. The notes of remembrance are uncoordinated and uncontrived, and arrive as the news of the death propagates through the social network of friends. Romanoff and Terenzio (1998: 702) remark that "rituals of connection often arise spontaneously in secularized contexts and serve as an important source of solace to the mourner." When the mourner joins a likeminded community, there is the potential for assistance, even of a virtual sort. Massimi and Baecker (2010) note that "the primary 'task' of group commemoration remains the provision of social support. These technologies convey the message 'I am mourning too,' and may comfort the bereaved." In other words, information communication technologies provide the ability for mourners to connect with each other online, and find comfort in their shared experience. One of the primary technological advantages of having a space to commemorate the dead online is allowing for different mourners to participate in group commemoration without regard to distance or time (Jones 2004, Massimi and Baecker 2010, Walter et al. 2011).

The most prevalent (and personal) manifestation of commemoration in the social

networking space is relating memories of the deceased. Vale-Taylor (2009), and Massimi and Baecker (2010) highlight the importance for the mourners of sharing personal history involving the deceased, in that "stories allow the bereaved to place structure around the life events of the deceased and relate those events to their own life." Getty et al. (2011) draw our attention to the idea that grieving (as a type of ritualized behavior) is a form of public performance, wherein the "backstage emotion" of grief is brought to the surface as part of the cultural practices of mourning, and sharing stories offers mourners the opportunity to comfort each and experience emotional relief. The SNSs offers an emotionally safe space for sharing stories and easing the burden of grieving among a community of people who loved and cared about the deceased. Bavelas, Coates, and Johnson (2000: 945) note that the mourners, as the audience for the performance of the narrative, play a significant role in that they exert "power over the process of storytelling, and therefore the outcome of narrative identity…listener attentiveness elicits from the narrator more coherent stories, punchy endings, dynamic arcs over the course of the story, and overall, more specific and engaging stories."

The profile wall of the deceased is the specific space on the social networking site where the mourners come together to share their stories. Stokes (2012: 366) explains how memorializing the profile wall transforms it from the personal expression of the deceased into a space for remembrance and storytelling:

> Most social network sites now allow the relatives of deceased users to choose to keep their profiles online as a memorial, allowing other users to post tributes and messages, sometimes speaking of the dead in third person, sometimes in second person. In effect, a profile site is converted into a tribute site, a space of commemoration – a sort of open-ended electronic wake.

The fact that this sharing of private thought takes place in a public space is noted by Gibson (2007: 422): "The opening up of private experiences of death and grief shared to strangers is the result not just of the growth in communication and media technologies, but also the will and desire to record one's own or a significant other's existence in the face of death and its annihilations." In essence, sharing stories of the dead is a way to honor their lives and their continued importance to the bereaved, and to reflect on one's own mortality.

In addition to sharing private remembrances in a shared social space, another aspect of the new mode of commemoration that may be unique to the SNS space is the practice of addressing the dead directly in a public space. The regular practice on SNSs is to write to the owner of the wall directly, even though one is aware that anyone who is friends with the wall-owner can see what you have written. After the wall-owner is deceased, people continue to write to him or her. DeGroot (2012: 195) sees this communication as part of a process of continuing a relationship with the deceased, in that "grieving individuals wrote to the deceased as if the deceased could read the messages." Hayes and Dourish (2013: 155) characterize this communication as a form of "public private speech," and noted that this "in the case of postmortem profiles constitutes a form of public grief rarely available otherwise." Walter (2013: 20) and Kasket (2012) imply that the nature of communication on SNSs makes this kind of speech possible: "Addressing the dead is done in the knowledge that there is a living audience which, by accepting such direct address and even actively joining in, legitimates a practice that hitherto some people may have felt somewhat embarrassed about." Brubaker and Hayes (2011: 127) seem to think that the pattern of social interaction on social networking sites

makes it more likely that a mourner will continue to communicate with the dead on the deceased's wall:

> The ongoing engagement with the MySpace community and the common practices and behaviors of its members may overcome any other kind of pressure that an individual might feel to change his or her comments to talk *about* a person rather than *to* them. In other funerary settings, friends commonly talk about the deceased with each other, but reserve comments directed towards the deceased for more intimate moments.

Following the themes of community, greater inclusivity, decreased formality, a focus on individuality expressed via participation in a group, and the lack of clear boundaries between private and public, it makes sense that friends expressing their sadness will address these remembrances to the deceased personally and in a space of communal grieving, even though the thoughts might be of an ostensibly private nature.

Commemoration – remembering the deceased within the community – is an important part of the grieving process. Mourners come together to grieve their loved one, and the online space afforded by social networking sites allows for more people to participate than previously. There may be an expectation of formal speech in remembrances of the dead, from a pre-Internet era – but the social norms of SNSs tend towards the vernacular and casual modes of discourse. Mourners share stories on the profile wall of the deceased, and speak to the dead directly in a form of "public private speech" that may be unique to this environment. The friends of the dead express their continued friendship and sense of loss using the language that they feel most familiar with, the informal and personal declarations of private thoughts in a public space.

CONCLUSION

To return to the initial premise of the paper, a fundamental shift is occurring in how death and grief are processed in the communities created on social networking sites. Identity remains specific, unique and finite, but may no longer be entirely bound by the exigencies of physical existence. In pre-ICT society, death put an end to the existence and expression of the individual person. The person who died was mourned by her immediate family and some close friends, and remembered at a funeral ceremony or a singular memorial event. Society expected mourners to come to terms with the loss of their loved ones and continue with their lives without them.

In the post-Internet era, the identity of the individual is expressed through participation in various groups, and has the ability to persist as a digital echo following the demise of its creator. A person's online identity is made up of several components – what he shares (posts) of his own life and feelings, things that he forwards or shares from friends or the internet in general, political posts, humor, science, and tidbits of general interest. These online interactions take place between the individual and various overlapping groups of friends who may or may not have similar interests, and who may or may not become friends via the individual (e.g., through the discovery of shared interests). When a person dies, these different groups of friends are brought into contact and united in their grief.

The mores and customs of the social networking sites, aided by the ability of digital communication technology to elide distance and halt or expand time, enable connection within a much larger social group. Death does not necessitate a cessation of

relationships or communication between the living and the dead. Rather, the death of a friend results in the formation of a community of mourners, consisting of many overlapping social circles.

Feeling grief, sadness and loss at the death of a friend or loved one is a universal emotion that remains unchanged from the first moment that we (as humanity) became aware of mortality. How has the (relatively) new ability to connect to many people simultaneously, at far reach, affected the way we express our grief when someone in our network of friends dies? Not everyone is online – the totality of people who knew and loved the deceased are not present on Facebook. How do the expectations and feelings of the non-Internet enabled people come into play when talking about grief and commemoration? It seems clear that there is no single, correct, way to grieve and mourn; there are no established social rules that guide the bereaved into action. This state of being was beginning to coalesce prior to the widespread use of SNSs, in the social emphasis on personal preference and individual wishes directing the funerary practices, and the general social movement away from formal ritual. Informality currently characterizes the way people dress, eat, conduct business and social events, conduct courtship and relationships, and has begun to make inroads in the rituals that surround death.

Following death, the ritual of the funeral takes place. After the funeral, friends and family are expected to come to terms with their feelings and get back to everyday life; the people who were most affected by the loss given dispensation for grief, for a limited amount of time. A person is given up to twelve weeks of Federally-mandated

(unpaid) leave from work to adjust to having a new child in her family, but two weeks maximum to grieve the loss of a child, spouse or parent.

Given this brief recovery period, how does a person negotiate her grief and come through the experience in a psychologically intact and healthy way? George Bonanno's work indicates that there is no set path through grief, and that each person comes to terms with the loss in her own way. Klass, Silverman and Nickman's theory of Continuing Bonds fits in with Bonanno's findings on grieving; namely, that grieving is a process of adjusting to a new reality, and that remembering the deceased, continuing to interact with the deceased in the way one feels most comfortable is a normal and healthy adaptation to the death of a loved one.

The new social reality recognizes that integrating the dead into the everyday world of the bereaved, and interacting with them in a way that redefines and continues the relationship, is a healthy aspect of grieving and accepting the loss. Mourners create informal and personalized rituals to mark the passing of their loved one, usually in a shared social space. One of the most common rituals forms is commemoration. Sharing stories of the deceased on their profile walls, and/or writing messages of remembrance and loss directly to the deceased is a form of public-private speech which may be unique to the medium.

In the particular modality of the SNS, it is possible to continue to write on the wall of the deceased and share status updates and little morsels of daily life, in exactly the same way that you would with someone who was still alive. In the past, this communication might have taken the form of letters written to the dead and placed inside the casket, or letters written and never mailed, comments in a memorial book, shared

stories at a funeral, wake or other religious ceremony, or even internal monologues with the dead. At no point in any of these conversations do the dead respond, and yet, in the SNSs, there is no difference in practice between writing to someone who is alive but may choose not to answer (such as someone famous, or the object of an unrequited affection) and someone who is unable to answer, because they are no longer alive.

Another quality that distinguishes the grieving discourse on SNSs from that of the near past is the blurring between public and private information. "The Personal Is Political" was a feminist rallying cry from the 1970s, but if it indicates that the choices we make on a personal level are reflected in our political reality, then it is certainly true that the movement of the personal toward the public is equally revolutionary. It is customary online to share details of one's life amongst one's collection of friends and acquaintances that a generation farther removed would find uncomfortably personal: proceedings of a date, or a job interview, injuries, social mishaps, medical test results, family traumas, psychological insights. All of these items are grist for the giant mill that is the social networking update stream. A notice that a friend is having a cancer relapse is followed immediately by a picture of a friend's child, or a political slogan cleverly framed, or a friend's picture of a great meal of BBQ that she was just served. There is no special distinction, no special category where topics of weighty import are tagged as especially significant and worthy of solemn observation.

The developing trend in grieving practices on social networking sites is a shift from the formal, ceremonial, hierarchical, private and exclusive to greater connection, inclusivity, informality and personal expression in a public space. It seems more likely that expressions of mourning will change to fit the medium, rather than that extremely

formal and ceremonial expression of grief will appear on memorialized Facebook profiles. Leonard Shlain (2003) writes that "the *process* people use to absorb and generate information is a more important factor shaping culture than the *content* of the information that they are absorbing or generating" (368). The way in which grief is experienced and expressed on social networking sites is a microcosm of the changing social norms of the pre- and post-Internet era.

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